

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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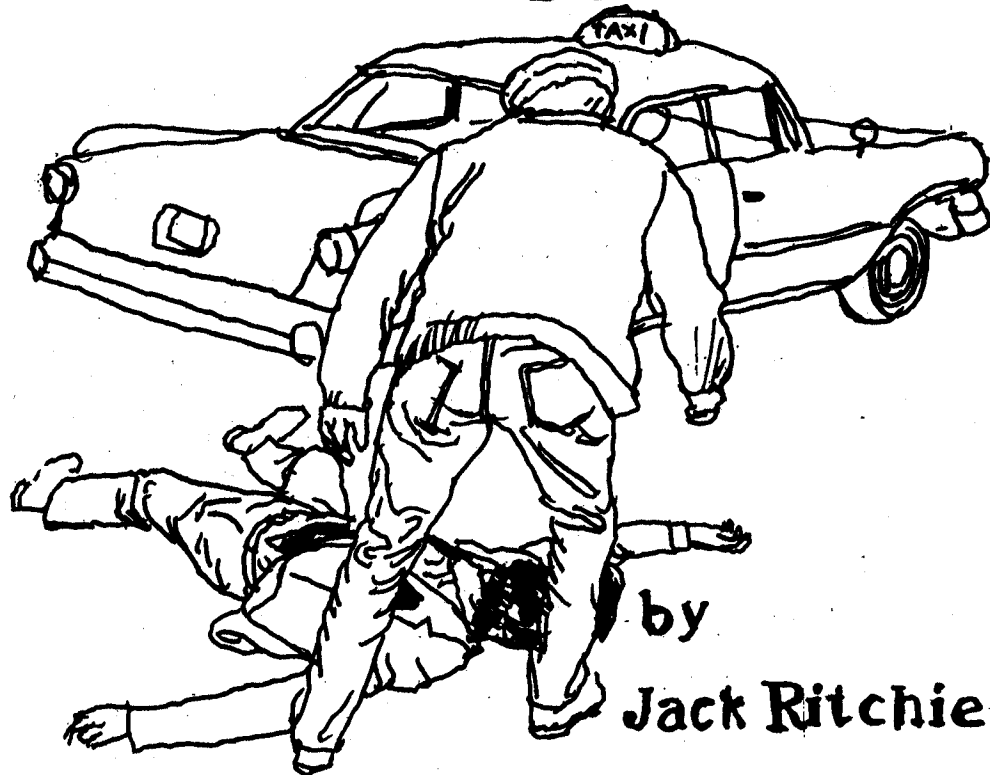
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The victim had been drinking, but that's not what the Captain meant when he said he was shot when he was dead . . .

an odd pair of socks



by
Jack Ritchie

Ralph and I were waiting in the squad room for more information.

Ralph yawned. "The victim was wearing one blue sock and one green."

"Ah," I said. "That can tell us many things."

"Like what?"

"There is a strong possibility that the victim was color-blind. Either that, or he dressed in the dark."

"Maybe he was just blind."

"No, Ralph. He had a pair of prescription glasses in his jacket pocket."

Ralph chuckled. "I'll bet he's got another pair of socks just like that at home."

"Not necessarily, Ralph. He could just have been frugal."

"What does frugal have to do with it?"

"Ralph, it is seldom that *both* of a pair of socks wear out at the same time. It is, though, common practice to throw away the entire pair when one of them wears out. However, a frugal person would *save* the good sock, anticipating the possibility of matching it in the future when a similarly colored pair wore out."

"Then why didn't he wait until he got a match-up?"

"This would indicate to me that the victim was a bachelor."

Ralph waited.

"Ralph, bachelors are notorious for putting off doing their laundry. There is a *strong* possibility that this frugal bachelor had run completely out of clean socks—except for the single blue sock and the green one. What else could he do? He put them on, knowing that his trouser legs would cover them anyway, and besides, who ever actually looks at your socks to see if they match?"

Ralph sighed. "Well, anyway, this is what we got solid. The victim was found dead in an alley off Fremont Street at six A.M. Sunday by a taxi driver taking a shortcut. The victim is approximately six foot two, in his late twenties, and weighs about 200 pounds. He appears to have been shot once through the heart. He had no wallet on his person, so for now he is unidentified. It seems possible that he was accosted by a holdup man, resisted, and was shot."

Captain Witherspoon came into the squad room with some papers. "We checked out the victim's fingerprints. His name is Mickey Tyler. He has a record of assaults and batteries, one drunk and disorderly, and one count on the possession of pornographic films. Also he drowned."

Ralph raised an eyebrow. "Drowned? His clothes weren't even wet."

"I know. Probably wasn't wearing them when he drowned. Looks like somebody dressed him after he was dead."

"What about the bullet hole in his heart?"

"It didn't kill him. He was shot when he was dead. The coroner

noticed that there was practically no bleeding. So he investigated and found the water in his lungs."

"Was it fresh or salt?" I asked.

Captain Witherspoon stared at me. "Henry, we are two thousand miles from the nearest ocean."

"True, Captain," I said. "True. But there is always the possibility that he was an employee of the city aquarium and drowned in one of the saltwater tanks."

"No. He worked for the Renaldi Landscaping Company. It's one of those outfits that comes around every week or so and cuts your grass and waters the flowers."

I rubbed my jaw. "I presume that chlorine was present in the fresh water in his lungs?"

Captain Witherspoon looked at me again. "Henry, why do you presume that there was chlorine in his lungs? Why couldn't he have drowned in a pond, a river, a lake?"

"Because he was either naked or wearing a swimming suit when he drowned, and the weather this time of the year is much too cold for anybody to go swimming—or wading, for that matter."

"Why couldn't he have drowned in a bathtub?"

"Were there any bruises or contusions? Was there any alcohol in his blood? Drugs?"

"No bruises, contusions, or bumps. Also no drugs. But there was some alcohol. Probably he had two or three drinks before he died."

I nodded. "The only way he could have drowned in a bathtub was if someone had held him under the water. But that would have taken some doing. After all, he was six foot two, weighed 200 pounds, and was in nearly full possession of his senses and strength. There would have had to be some marks or bruises."

Witherspoon agreed. "You're right, Henry. There was chlorine in the water in his lungs."

"That means he was pushed into the deep end of an indoor swimming pool and allowed to drown. Obviously he couldn't swim, or he would have. And then someone went through the rigmarole of dressing him and dumping him in an alley with a bullet through his heart. The purpose, apparently, was to make it seem as though Tyler had died somewhere else and in a different way. How long was he dead before his body was discovered?"

"The coroner places death at around midnight, give or take an hour."

I allowed my mind to compute for a moment. "Mickey Tyler was drowned in a private indoor swimming pool."

Witherspoon folded his arms. "The indoor swimming pool I'll accept, Henry. But why does it have to be a *private* indoor swimming pool? Couldn't he have drowned in a public natatorium, or a high-school pool, or something like that?"

"All the public pools were closed and locked at the time he died, which was around midnight Saturday. Besides, the alcohol in his blood suggests a private pool and a very private party. A tête-à-tête. No witnesses. Just the two of them. The murderess and her victim having a tryst."

"What's a tryst?" Ralph asked.

Captain Witherspoon explained it to him.

"Hell," Ralph said. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? So there they were having this tryst beside the swimming pool and she pushed him into the deep end. Why?"

"Ralph," I said. "How many people in the world can afford indoor swimming pools?"

"Not many," Ralph conceded.

"Exactly," I said. "And as a contrast, let us for a moment consider the socioeconomic status of the victim."

They considered and waited.

I continued. "It is my contention that the murderess subscribes to the services of the Renaldi Landscaping Company, and further that she is on Tyler's route. It is the old Lady Chatterley routine all over again, only this time with a yard boy. And I believe that we are looking for a rather strong woman. A Valkyrie type, I would imagine."

"Why?" both Ralph and Captain Witherspoon asked.

"Because she had to have the strength to haul him out of the pool, dress him, and drag him to a car."

"All right, Henry," Captain Witherspoon said. "And now *why* did she kill him?"

"My guess is blackmail. He wanted money or he would expose the whole affair. Perhaps she had been paying, but balked at his increasing demands. Or perhaps she refused to pay at all, lost her temper, and gave him that fatal push. But whatever it was, our murderess is a hefty

married woman—discontented, yes—but by no means ready to lose a home, a husband, and his income just because of a little affair.”

Captain Witherspoon rubbed the back of his neck for a while. “Married woman, strong and hefty, indoor swimming pool, on Tyler’s route? How many people could fit that?”

Ralph shrugged. “Let’s hope there’s at least one.”

Ralph and I went to the Renaldi Landscaping Company and got a list of the suburban homes Tyler had serviced. We drove to the area and began our questioning.

By late afternoon we found the one—and only—indoor swimming pool in the neighborhood.

We questioned the sole occupant of the house and from the evasive responses we received it was evident that we had struck pay dirt.

We took the suspect to headquarters for booking and then I went to the nearest window and brooded.

“Now, Henry,” Ralph said. “Don’t take it so hard. After all, you *did* lead us to the spot. And you were absolutely right. Except for that one detail.”

“Ralph,” I said, “when I say ‘tryst,’ I mean ‘tryst.’ ”

“I know,” Ralph said.

“And when I mean ‘tryst,’ I also mean a man and a *woman*. Not a man and another. . .”

“Times change,” Ralph said. “But one of them still wasn’t quite ready to let the world know about himself. Or to be blackmailed for it either.”

He helped me watch the traffic on the street below and then said, “Henry, I deduce that you are a frugal bachelor who’s running awful short on clean laundry.”

I looked down at my socks.

Damn. I had been hoping nobody would notice.

